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# Exegeting Culture: Formation, Identity, Mission

Philip D. Kenneson

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Most church leaders would agree that however one articulates the church's mission, this mission cannot be separated from *God's* mission in the world. Some missional congregations have tried to underscore this crucial point by insisting that the church does not so much *have* its own mission as *God's* mission *has a church*. *God's* mission is to reconcile all things in Christ, to bring healing and wholeness and completeness—in a word, *shalom*—to the whole created order. In light of that mission, the church's calling in the world is to be an embodied sign, foretaste and servant of *God's* reign of *shalom*, *God's* new humanity, *God's* new creation.

One way of naming *God's* desire for humanity, according to the apostle Paul, is that we be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8.29). *God's* transformational mission has a church—a community who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is called to welcome and cooperate with *God's* transformational work in its midst and, in so doing, be a witness to and agent of that transformational mission.

Yet the church never serves *God's* missional purposes in a cultural vacuum. *God's* Spirit is at work forming communities in and through the particularities of time and space to bear always-culturally-embodied witness to *God's* reconciling purposes to persons who are themselves creatures of particular times and places. For this reason alone, churches cannot be content to be students only of Scripture (with its story and message that can never easily be separated from its own cultural contexts); rather, churches must also be students of the cultures within which they find themselves, cultures that are inevitably shaping their own minds, hearts, and imaginations as well as of those they hope to serve.

## **To Be Human Is To Be Formed**

To state the obvious: human beings are alive, and part of our peculiar aliveness stems from the fact that we are *animated* beings. What makes us different from inanimate objects is that we are capable of mutual animation: we can be moved to act by others while at the same time moving others to act. This capacity, this dynamism, is part of what we are trying to convey when we reach for such words as *spirit*. The English verb *animate*, from a Latin word that means “to fill with breath or spirit,” echoes the Hebrew and Greek words for *spirit* that likewise evoke notions of *life* and *breath*.

We are spiritual, animated beings in the sense that we can be moved by people and events and experiences outside of ourselves. In short, our spirits can be moved by other animating spirits, just as our spirit can also move others. Indeed, these other spirits often become so internalized that they in some sense dwell within us, becoming inseparable from us. This capacity for spiritual indwelling is what makes it possible for us to be animated both by the spirit of the age and the same Spirit that animated Jesus.

This spiritual nature partly accounts, therefore, for why human beings are irreducibly social creatures—for nearly everything that animates our daily lives is the result of complex social interaction. Hence the question is never *whether* we and our neighbors are being shaped, but always *by whom* and *into what* we are being shaped. If *God's* desire is to form and transform us more fully into our complete humanity, and if we desire to cooperate with that transformational process, then we will need to be as aware as possible of those

ways in which we are being transformed by other cultural processes into something far less glorious than the image of Christ.

### Some Basics of Cultural Formation

If we want a basic primer on cultural formation and the critical need for Christians to engage in cultural exegesis, we might begin by exploring two basic questions. First, *by what means* do cultures go about shaping our minds, affections, imaginations, our very humanity? And second, *what specific dimensions of our humanity* do cultures shape? In a treatment as brief as this, perhaps it will be sufficient to sketch why Christians should be much more attentive to how our *desires, convictions and virtues* are profoundly shaped by pervasive cultural *stories, practices and institutions*.

#### Stories, Practices and Institutions

Although cultures shape us in innumerable ways, few ways are as powerful as stories. Human beings are story-shaped creatures, making sense of nearly everything through narrative means. We experience the events of our daily lives as unfolding stories, just as we experience the overall shape of our lives as a life story. Even our dreams come to us in story form (even if often bizarre ones), which suggests something of how deeply narrative is woven into our humanness. We do not will the world to come to us as story; it just does. Yet the particular *shape* of those stories, as well as the ways in which they frame and give meaning to our experiences and our lives, is culturally dependent, operating at multiple levels simultaneously. Families often attempt to instill a sense of familial identity by telling family stories; businesses introduce their core values and corporate cultures to new employees by telling their company story; and nations articulate something of what it means to be a citizen of a particular place by rehearsing the history of its founding and development, as well as instilling its determinative principles. Any accounting of the formative influence of a particular culture will have to attend carefully to the powerful stories that are on offer, stories meant to shape how we understand ourselves, the world around us, and our place within it.

If we are formed definitively by the stories we internalize and through which we come to understand nearly everything, we are also shaped by the practices we regularly engage in. We are and become, in some sense, what we do. A practice can be any activity that both *presumes* and *reinforces* a particular way of life, a particular way of seeing, understanding, and interacting with the world. As such, a practice and the way in which it is engaged are inseparable from particular desires, convictions, and virtues that make the practice intelligible in the first place. To take a relatively simple and mundane example, consider what must be in place to make regularly brushing one's teeth intelligible as a practice. We obviously do not enter the world knowing we should brush our teeth; we have to be formed to do this. This requires us to internalize a number of convictions about the importance of good dental hygiene and how toothbrushing is connected to such, as well as the desirability of healthy teeth in relationship to things like our outward appearance and overall long-term health. Likewise, brushing one's teeth regularly and properly demands the virtue of self-discipline and a certain level of attentiveness.

Finally, in addition to stories and practices, human life is definitively shaped by an array of institutions. Here again the notion of institution is employed quite broadly, pointing to any of the myriad social structures that order a people's life together. Institutions serve a society or culture by making it possible to hand down across generations the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and ways of living that both presume and undergird a particular understanding and embodiment of human flourishing. Our daily lives are shaped by a host of institutions: legal and political institutions (constitutions, legislatures, legal codes, police forces, judiciaries, prisons); economic institutions (currencies, banks, stock and bond markets, regulatory agencies, businesses, labor unions); educational institutions (schools, accrediting associations, curricula, books and other instructional media); medical institutions (clinics, hospitals, medical schools, insurance regulations); social institutions (marriage, family, language, holidays, entertainment industries); and religious institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques, seminaries, sacred texts). Of course, the boundaries between and among all of these are permeable, with most falling into any number of categories. What is less debatable is that the

mere existence of an institution represents a complex set of shared convictions about human flourishing and how human life might best be ordered to support a culture's understanding of human well-being.

### Desires, Convictions, Virtues

This leads us quite naturally to consider how human desires, convictions, and virtues are formed in and through our participation in cultures. Along the way, we will briefly note a few of the places where communities of Christian disciples living at the intersection of competing formation systems may experience tension.

The animating desires of our lives are never simply inborn or self-generated; rather, just as our spirits are shaped by the spirits of others, so our animating desires are schooled by stories, practices, and institutions that purport to tell us what we should want, what we should long and yearn for. And this is true even with respect to our most fundamental needs, such as food, security, and belonging, since we come to recognize these needs *as* needs primarily through cultures that tell us which ways of meeting these needs are most desirable, sensible, and acceptable.

Followers of Jesus and of the way of Jesus are called to have their desires shaped after the pattern they see in Jesus, who came not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him. Just as Christians are called to have their loves rightly ordered to the love of God, so we are called not to extinguish desire but rather to desire rightly. But of course all of us find ourselves being formed daily within cultures that shape our longings, our yearnings, our desires. In much of American society, for example, an array of desires and longings about such things as material success, upward mobility, and financial security have been packaged together and given a name: The American Dream. This vision and story of "the good life" is so pervasive and so largely unchallenged that many people, including many Christians, uncritically appropriate these desires and longings in ways that grant them enormous power in orienting their daily lives and decisions. Underwriting this vision is a multibillion-dollar advertising industry whose ubiquitous presence all but guarantees that new desires will be continually manufactured and established ones, routinely reinforced. To be clear, these desires and longings need not be for anything wicked or even unseemly; rather, their most significant impact may be the ways in which they subtly crowd out, or even appear compatible with, our desire for God and the things of God.

Lest we think such desires are magically checked at the door when we gather as a church, we should add that most congregations find themselves facing similar challenges when it comes to sorting through their desires as a congregation. What voices and cultural assumptions, for example, inform a church's collective imagination about what will count for being a "successful" church? A "healthy" church? How and on what basis will such success and health be evaluated? Moreover, what might it look like for congregations to be communities of rightly ordered desire? Might this demand that they have the courage to name those desires that, like the weeds in the parable of the sower, crowd out the desire for God and things of God? Answering such questions would demand that congregations become more attentive to the varied ways their desires are being daily shaped and formed.

In addition to our desires, cultures also shape our deepest convictions through stories, practices, and institutions. Convictions are those beliefs we hold that shape and inform our everyday experiences of the world. These convictions most often concern matters which cannot be adjudicated simply by appealing to empirical data or by looking out the window to see how the world *really* is. Nevertheless, they concern matters about which we can scarcely refrain from having (likely deep) convictions. For example, when it comes to the question of whether human life has meaning or purpose, some people hold the conviction that it has none at all, while others insist such meaning or purpose is either granted or given from some divine source, while still others hold that it is discovered or created. Our varied views on this matter are directly tied to the stories we have internalized, the practices we engage in, and the institutions we interact with that presume and reinforce a certain answer to this and other fundamental questions. Likewise, some people hold the conviction that the world is ordered in such a way that people generally get what they deserve in this life, while others resist such a view. Many people, in the face of tragedy, find themselves leaning on their conviction that "everything happens for a reason" (by which they seem to mean something akin to fate or

divine providence) while others in similar circumstances reject such a notion. In cultures such as ours, there are widespread convictions that “newer is better,” “more is better,” and “faster is better.” And when people wrestle with whether and how human beings might curb their penchant for violence, many people fall back upon their deep conviction that “sometimes violence is necessary.” Again, we are not born with these convictions about the world and how it works; rather, we are formed to see and experience the world in certain ways, having internalized certain convictions about these matters on the basis of our interactions with stories, practices, and institutions.

As a number of the examples above suggest, these internalized convictions—and the world they assume and project—are often at odds with the convictions Christians are called to hold and embody in light of God’s in-breaking reign of *shalom*. How will communities of Christians who believe that everything they possess comes first of all by means of gift and grace live in a culture that forms us to think that what we have is exclusively the result of our hard work and ingenuity? How will we learn to slow down and be attentive to our neighbors in order truly to see them, know them, and love them in a culture that insists that the good life is one lived at breakneck speed? How will we be formed by the Spirit of the Prince of Peace to love even our enemies in a world that continues to dehumanize and demonize those who are the objects of our “necessary” violence?

Not surprisingly, what we call *virtues* are tightly bound up with convictions. A virtue is simply a particular excellence that commends something as a fitting specimen, given certain shared convictions about its intended purpose. We still use the word *virtue* in this sense in speaking of the virtues of certain products. For example, the virtues of a good sports car are that it be fast, eye-catching, and handle well, while customer service at a fast-food restaurant should be marked by the virtues of speed, accuracy, and politeness. The primary virtue of a good watch is its accuracy in keeping time—though, for some, a fashion watch’s virtue may be its ability to accessorize well.

We also speak of human virtues or excellences, and these virtues, like the above examples, cannot be separated from the convictions we have about what human beings are *for*, as well as the practices and institutions that presume and reinforce such convictions. In short, any list of desirable human virtues is an argument about human flourishing, about what it means to be human. The ancient Greeks held up virtues such as courage, justice, wisdom, and moderation, while the New Testament would also have us attend to the Spirit’s work (and our cooperation with that work) in cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The presence and bounty of that fruit is one measure of the degree to which we are (or are not) being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3.18). Communities of disciples in cultures like ours, therefore, would do well to attend to the virtues that are being exalted and instilled within daily life to see if they might be forming habits of mind and patterns of action that are at odds with God’s desires for the shape of human life. For example, if much of contemporary life exalts the virtues of convenience, productivity, efficiency, and speed, how will the fruit of patience take root in the lives of those who seek to bear embodied witness to the patient God revealed in the story of Scripture?

### **Practicing Cultural Exegesis**

Most communities of Christians are likely much more practiced at reading and interpreting Scripture than they are at reading and interpreting the cultures within which they find themselves. One of the deep ironies of this is that our cultural formation significantly impacts all areas of our lives, including the ways we read Scripture. For example, if I find myself in a culture that consistently encourages me to see everything in the world around me simply as resources to be used for whatever benefit can be gained from them, then I might more easily misread the creation accounts as supporting the notion that God made this beautiful world for me (or even us), remaining blind to Scripture’s insistence that creation has an integrity and goodness apart from us. Or if I find myself in a culture that prizes productivity above everything else, and which drives people to justify their existence—to themselves and to others—by always being productive, then will it be surprising if I ignore completely Scripture’s insistence on the rhythms of rest and Sabbath in human life, or misunderstand its role entirely by regarding it as little more than the divine strategy for ensuring ongoing productivity? Or if

I find myself in a culture that has formed me to think of myself first of all as an individual and to take pride in my presumed independence, entering into relationships only when and for as long as they are personally beneficial, how likely am I to hear and embrace Paul's words about my true identity being found first of all in being a mutually dependent member of the body of Christ?

Perhaps these brief soundings into the importance of cultural exegesis begin to reveal why those who care deeply about the shape of their lives, and whether those lives are bearing embodied witness to God and God's in-breaking kingdom, would do well to address the widespread inattentiveness to how we are being daily shaped by the myriad spirits of the age. Such cultural exegesis will at minimum require that we attend more carefully to the stories that shape our imaginations, the practices we regularly engage in, and the institutions that support a particular shared way of life. We will likewise need to attend more carefully to how these stories, practices, and institutions presume and instill certain desires, convictions, and virtues in order to discern how these might be at odds with being more fully conformed into the image of Christ. These are admittedly complex matters, and ones that will demand much wisdom and discernment. They will also demand our willingness to learn from our brothers and sisters around the world and across time. Their struggles to remain faithful to the way of Jesus in their time and place can helpfully inform and illuminate our own by offering much-needed perspective and critical distance on these cultures to which we are so intimately and inextricably bound.

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